RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SUMMARY

Head Start Teachers' Views on the Family-Teacher Relationship

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This study looked at Head Start teachers' relationships with families. The purpose of the research was to document home-school relationships from the perspective of teachers and to understand the teacher characteristics that may predict how teachers perceive their relationships with families. The study used a national sample of Head Start teachers and a questionnaire called the Family Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality measure. Results suggest that teachers' job satisfaction, caregiving beliefs, and depressive symptoms all predicted how they viewed relationships with families. These results point to the importance of continuing to support teachers' psychological wellbeing and their developmentally appropriate beliefs, as these may promote positive relationships with families.

Keywords: home-school relationships, early childhood education, Head Start

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between school and home is important to young children's learning and development (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Research has found that parents play a greater role in supporting children's development than early childhood education (ECE) teachers and programs (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002). Therefore, positive home-school relationships are important contributors to children's learning (Epstein, 2001).

Research has shown that family engagement contributes to children's learning (Daniel et al., 2016; Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Family engagement is an important component of the Head Start program model. In fact, Head Start has a legislative mandate to include families in program decisions and to offer families support and opportunities for involvement, as reflected in the Head Start Performance Standards (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Little of the research on family engagement has looked at the role of teachers and their relationships with families (Christenson & Carlson, 2005). This is increasingly important given the growing diversity of children. Families from diverse backgrounds may face barriers to

involvement in their child's education. For example, they may speak a different language from the teacher, or they may have cultural differences that are not understood by the teacher or program (Öztürk, 2013). However, when teachers build strong relationships with families, these relationships can act as a buffer against risk factors like including poverty and family instability (Nalls et al, 2010). Strong family-teacher relationships are also related to increased family involvement (Knopf & Swick, 2007). When families feel comfortable with a teacher, they are more likely to share information and concerns, which can help teachers better individualize their instruction (Baker & Manfredi-Petitt, 2004).

Research has identified three important components of the teacher-family relationship that serve as a foundation for defining family-provider relationship quality: family-specific knowledge, attitudes about families, and teacher practices with families (Bromer et al., 2011). Family-specific knowledge is the knowledge teachers have about families generally—such as knowledge of factors that promote healthy family functioning and effective parenting practices—as well as knowledge about the specific families they are serving. Attitudes about families includes respect, commitment and caring, empowerment, openness to change, and understanding children's context and how that affects development (Forry et al., 2012). Overall, teachers tend to perceive their level of respect for families more highly than it is perceived by families (Hadley & Rouse, 2018). Teacher practices that facilitate teacher-family relationships include both relational skills and goal-oriented skills, like engaging in joint decision-making with families (Halgunseth et al., 2009).

Although teacher-family relationships are important, they are challenging to measure. Until recently, there has not been a measure that comprehensively examined the quality of family and provider/teacher relationships in ECE. The Family and Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality (FPTRQ) suite of measures (Kim et al., 2014) was developed to address this need. This new instrument has the potential to measure the teacher-family relationship from multiple perspectives and comprehensively examine knowledge, practices, and attitudes using one questionnaire.

Most studies of teacher-family relationships have focused on how families view the relationship. However, it is also important to consider how teachers perceive their relationships with families. Teachers' characteristics like psychological wellbeing, are related to areas like how teachers respond to children and to their job-related stress (Jeon et al., 2019). However, little is known about how teacher characteristics may influence home-school relationships from the perspective of the teacher.

CURRENT STUDY

The purpose of our study was to explore teacher characteristics that may influence the way teachers perceive the quality of their relationships with families. We had two research questions:

> 1. How do Head Start teachers perceive the quality of their relationships with families?
> 2. What teacher characteristics predict the perceived quality of Head Start teachers' relationships with families?

To answer these questions, we used secondary analysis of quantitative data collected through the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey: 2014 cohort (FACES 2014; Tarullo et al., 2017). FACES 2014 was a nationally representative descriptive study of Head Start programs, teachers, children, and families. The current study utilized the data from the teacher survey.

Participants in our sample were 229 Head Start teachers who completed the FPTRQ Short Form teacher questionnaire and demographic survey. The FPTRQ Short Form for teachers has 23 items that teachers answer about their work and relationships with families. These 23 items are averaged to obtain a total score and three construct scores: family-specific knowledge (e.g., "I know how parents discipline their child,"), practices (e.g., "How often are you able to set goals with parents for their child?"), and attitudes (e.g., "Sometimes it is hard for me to support the way parents raise their children."). Most items are scored on a four-point scale, and higher scores represent more positive relationships with families.

We completed multiple regression analyses to examine teacher characteristics that predicted teachers' FPTRQ total score and construct scores. We examined these teacher characteristics as predictors: reported depressive symptoms, job satisfaction, beliefs about developmentally appropriate instruction, age, years of experience, level of education, and race and ethnicity.

KEY FINDINGS

On average, teachers had a total score of 73.2 on the FPTRQ. There are not yet thresholds for high and low FPTRQ scores, so we converted construct scores into the percentage of possible points to make these scores easier to interpret. Teachers earned an average of 61% of the possible points on the family-specific knowledge construct, for an average score of 12.2 out of a possible 20. Of the five items, teachers most frequently agreed that they knew about families' culture and values. They least often agreed that they knew how families disciplined their children. They had an average score of 30.0 on the attitudes scale out of 36 points, 83.3% of the possible points. Of the nine items, teachers most often said that they teach and care for children because they enjoy it. They had the lowest score for the item about supporting how parents raise their children. For practices, teachers had an average score of 30.6 out of a possible 36 points, 85.0% of the points possible. They most often reported frequently talking to parents about children's progress. Teachers least often reported that they believed it was part of their job to respond to issues or questions outside of normal care hours.

Through the multiple regression models, we found that attending graduate school and having more child-centered beliefs both predicted higher FPTRQ total scores. Looking at family-specific knowledge, Black teachers scored 1.12 points lower than White, non-Hispanic teachers. Teachers' age negatively predicted family-specific knowledge, meaning that older teachers tended to have lower scores on this construct. Other predictors of higher family-specific knowledge included more child-centered beliefs, more didactic beliefs, and more years of teaching experience. For the attitudes construct, Black teachers scored significantly higher than White non-Hispanic teachers, 1.15 points on average. Teachers who reported fewer depressive symptoms and those with more child-centered beliefs had significantly higher attitudes scores. Finally, for the practices construct, teachers who had at least some graduate school credits, Black teachers (compared to White, non-

Hispanic teachers), and those with higher job satisfaction all had higher scores on their practices with families.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers play an important role in family engagement through their practices with families, their attitudes towards families, and their family-specific knowledge. In this study, we examined Head Start teachers' reported relationships with families using the FPTRQ measure. We also considered whether Head Start teachers' characteristics predicted how they perceived their relationships with families. We found that overall, teachers reported that they had close, positive relationships with the families of children in their classroom.

Building on that finding, we found some teacher characteristics that were related to more positive relationships with families. These varied by the constructs of the home-school relationship. This helps to confirm that home-school relationships are complex and multi-faceted. It may be important to continue to consider attitudes, knowledge, and practices with families separately, as well as looking at the overall quality of teachers' relationships with families.

One notable finding is that teachers' depressive symptoms predicted lower attitudes about families. This builds upon previous research that teachers' psychological wellbeing relates to their interactions with both children and families (Hamre & Pianta, 2004; McLean & Connor, 2015). Because of this, it is important to continue to support teacher wellbeing, especially in Head Start where teachers tend to report higher levels of depressive symptoms than other ECE contexts (Whitaker et al., 2015). Positively, there is evidence that teacher depressive symptoms can change when teachers have access to things like workplace supports (Hindmin & Bustamante, 2018). Additionally, the finding that Black teachers tend to have higher scores in some FPTRQ constructs than White, non-Hispanic teachers warrants further study, especially whether having a racial match between families and teachers may contribute to positive relationships. A next step in this research is to study how teacher-family relationship quality relates to children's social and academic outcomes. Another important step is to consider the quality of the teacher-family relationship from the families' perspective.

Children's learning is best supported when teacher and families have positive relationships (Epstein, 2001). Supporting Head Start teachers to have positive relationships with families may be one strategy that can contribute to closing the opportunity gap. Head Start programs are leaders in family engagement work within ECE. Moving forward, Head Start programs can continue to support teachers to have positive relationships with families. This could include more training, coaching, and education about reciprocal family engagement. Our results suggest that supports for teachers not directly related to their work with families, such as encouraging higher job satisfaction, psychological wellbeing, and more developmentally appropriate beliefs may be another avenue for helping teachers build more positive relationships with families.

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